

Explaining Value: Nagel on Normative Realism and the Teleology of Evolution

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In chapter 5 of *Mind and Cosmos*, Thomas Nagel argues that value realism shows that “something is missing from Darwinism, and from the standard biological conception of ourselves.”¹ A major part of what is missing is the right sort of explanation for the historical process that brought into existence value and beings like ourselves who can consciously recognize value. An adequate explanation of that process, Nagel suggests, would be teleological in character, with value as the *telos* that explains the emergence and evolution of living things.² As he says, “On a teleological account, the existence of value is not an accident, because it is part of the explanation of why there is such a thing as life, with all its possibilities of development and variation. In brief, value is not just an accidental side effect of life; rather, there is life because life is a necessary condition of value.”³

To some readers, such a teleological explanation of life’s development will seem outrageous, even absurd. In this essay, I will not challenge the possibility of such an explanation. But I wish to raise some doubts about Nagel’s claim that value realism calls for historical teleology of this sort. Before doing so, I will attempt to clarify Nagel’s line of thought.

Nagel presents his view in conversation with the work of Sharon Street, in particular her “Darwinian dilemma” for realist theories of value.⁴ Street argues that realism is incompatible with a Darwinian view of how evolution has shaped our moral and evaluative faculties. Nagel agrees with this claim. However, whereas Street maintains that we should give up realism, Nagel draws the alternative conclusion—we should revise the Darwinian account.

In spite of Nagel’s presentation, I think it is ultimately misleading to interpret his argument in the context of Street’s work. In the next section, I will explain why Street’s Darwinian dilemma is really a distraction from Nagel’s chief concerns. With Nagel’s argument in better focus, I will then argue that we can accept the sort of antireductionism and value realism that Nagel favors, without embracing a teleological account of the process of evolution.

Darwinism and Realism: Clarifying the Issues

As Nagel understands it, realism about value is the view that there are fundamental evaluative and moral truths that are true in their own right, and not made true by our attitudes or dispositions. Realists maintain that “when our value judgments are correct, it is because our dispositions are in accord with the actual structure and weight of values in the case at hand.”⁵ Nagel contrasts realism with subjectivism, according to which value judgments depend for their

truth on *us*—i.e., on our attitudes or dispositions or motivations. The dispute between realism and subjectivism is thus “a dispute about the order of normative explanation.”⁶

In a series of articles, Sharon Street has argued that Darwinian evolution poses a dilemma for realism. Street understands realism in roughly the same way as Nagel, as the view that “there are at least some evaluative facts or truths that hold independently of all our evaluative attitudes.”⁷ Street’s argument begins with the claim that evolution has exerted a profound influence on our basic evaluative tendencies, and that these tendencies in turn shape our normative judgments. Street then asks: What is the relationship between evolutionary influences on our judgments, and the normative truths posited by realism, which hold independently of our attitudes and judgments? One possibility is that evolution has selected our evaluative tendencies *because* they help us reliably track the independent normative truths, and thus evolution has been pushing us toward those truths. But this “tracking account” of our faculties is scientifically untenable, for it is much less plausible than the alternative “adaptive link account,” according to which our evaluative tendencies were selected because they promoted reproductive fitness. The other possibility is that there was *no* connection between evolutionary influences on our faculties and normative truths. What promotes reproductive fitness is one thing, and independent truths normative are another. While scientifically acceptable, this possibility means that it would be a *massive coincidence* if evolution has in fact shaped us to form reliably true beliefs about normative truths. As Street says:

Of course it’s *possible* that as a matter of sheer chance, some large portion of our evaluative judgments ended up true, due to a happy coincidence between the realist’s independent evaluative truths and the evaluative directions in which natural selection tended to push us, but this would require a fluke of luck that’s not only extremely unlikely, in view of the huge universe of logically possible evaluative judgments and truths, but also astoundingly convenient to the realist.⁸

Given the improbability of such a coincidence, we should conclude that evolution’s influence on our evaluative faculties was *not* pushing us toward normative truths, but away from them. In all likelihood, “the fund of evaluative judgments with which human reflection began was thoroughly contaminated.”⁹ And thus we should conclude that our faculties of normative judgment do not lead reliably to true beliefs. Rather, “all our reflection over the ages has really just been a process of assessing evaluative judgments that are mostly off the mark in terms of others that are mostly off the mark.”¹⁰ And therefore we should be *skeptics* about our ability to know normative truths. So realists have two options: embracing an untenable “tracking account,” or embracing normative skepticism. That is Street’s Darwinian dilemma.

Although Nagel frames his position in relation to Street’s argument, he never actually states her dilemma in its complete form. As Nagel correctly points out, part of Street’s argument is that “from a Darwinian perspective, the hypothesis of value realism is superfluous—a wheel that spins without being attached to anything.”¹¹ But Nagel doesn’t explain *why* this superfluity matters to Street. The reason is that she believes that, *given* this superfluity, we have no grounds

for thinking that our judgment-forming faculties are reliable. It would be a massive coincidence if our faculties were to lead us to recognize correctly the independent normative truths. And therefore *if* normative truths are independent of us as the realist supposes, we ought to conclude that we lack all *knowledge* of them. Moral realism leads to skepticism about moral knowledge.

Nagel doesn't spell out these points about coincidence, reliability, and knowledge. Nor does he consider the two most prominent types of reply to Street's argument. The first type of reply rejects Street's claim that evolutionary processes have exerted such a thorough-going influence on us that our normative judgments must be seen as the products of evolutionary forces.¹² The second type of reply grants a role to evolution in shaping our beliefs, but maintains that our faculties might still be reliable in leading us to normative truth, on account of some "pre-established harmony" or third factor. For example, David Enoch argues that it is plausible to suppose that it was evolutionarily beneficial to *believe* that our survival is good. And thus evolution has shaped us—for reasons of reproductive fitness—to be inclined to believe that our survival is good. However, it is also plausible to assume that our survival *is* good, in the realist sense. Thus, although evolution did not push us toward this belief *because* it was true, nevertheless evolution shaped us to reliably form the true belief that our survival is good: "The fact that (roughly speaking) survival is good pre-establishes the harmony between the normative truths and our normative beliefs."¹³ Other authors have made arguments with a similar structure with respect to our beliefs about the moral standing of persons and the badness of pain.¹⁴ The crucial point for this kind of reply is that, even without a "tracking account," we can explain why it is no coincidence that we reliably form true judgments about normative matters. And thus realism need not lead to skepticism.

What interests me here is not whether either of these replies to Street's argument (or some combination of them) is successful. Rather it is that Nagel does not even consider these replies. This is further evidence, I think, that while Nagel agrees with Street that value realism is superfluous to the Darwinian story, he has a different view of *why* this superfluity is important. For Nagel, the significance of the superfluity is not that it threatens to force the realist into moral skepticism. Rather the significance is that an adequate explanation of the process whereby value comes about should not make value's appearance and recognition into a side effect or "lucky accident." And according to Nagel, reckoning with this point leads us toward a teleological account of the evolutionary process.

We can identify four steps in Nagel's line of thought. The first step is the very basic assumption that the universe is fundamentally intelligible.¹⁵ The second step is identifying certain features of the universe as "significant" or "systematic," such that they require explanation and cannot be seen merely as "brute facts." The third step is an argument that explaining something requires more than just knowing the immediate cause of an event. Rather, "explanation, unlike causation, is not just of an event, but of an event under a description. An explanation must show why it was likely that an event *of that type* occurred."¹⁶ To illustrate this point, Nagel gives the example of tapping "3," "+," "5," and "=" into a pocket calculator, and seeing the figure "8" appear on the screen. We could identify the physical causes of the figure on the screen—e.g., the

electrons in the calculator's circuits. But a physical-causal explanation does not yet explain why the calculator *gave the right answer*—it doesn't explain its giving the right answer *as such*. "To explain the result under that description, we must refer to the algorithm governing the calculator, and the intention of the designer to give it a physical realization."¹⁷

These first three steps apply not only to matters of value but to explanation in general, including the explanation of consciousness and cognition (treated in chapters 3 and 4, respectively, of *Mind and Cosmos*). Joined to value realism, these three steps amount to the idea that the existence and recognition of value are among the significant features of our world that require explanation as such. For Nagel, this means having an answer to the question: Why is the universe such that it contains value and creatures who can recognize it—and why is it like that *under that description*?

We can make this question more specific, however, by taking a fourth step. This consists in recognizing that value comes into the world with the emergence of *life*, and indeed that value is coextensive with life, and that different kinds of normative reality correspond to different forms of life. As Nagel says:

What is the actual history of value in the world, so far as we are aware of it? Nothing in this domain can be regarded as obvious, but in the broadest sense, it seems to coincide with the history of life. First, with the appearance of life even in its earliest forms, there come into existence entities that *have* a good, and for which things can go well or badly. Even a bacterium has a good in this sense, in virtue of its proper functioning, whereas a rock does not. Eventually in the course of evolutionary history there appear conscious beings, whose experiential lives can go well or badly in ways that are familiar to us. Later some descendants of those beings, capable of reflection and self-consciousness, come to recognize what happens to them as good or bad, and to recognize reasons for pursuing or avoiding those things. They learn to think about how these reasons combine to determine what they should do. And finally they develop the collective capacity to think about reasons they may have that do not depend only on what is good or bad for themselves.¹⁸

With this picture of value and life in place, we can now refine our earlier question into a more specific one: Why did the historical process of evolution, through which life arose and developed, occur as it did, such as to give rise to value and creatures who recognize it? And because value and its recognition demand explanation *as such*, an adequate answer to this question about the process of evolution will not represent value and its recognition as a "lucky accident," or as something *superfluous* to the process. But that is exactly how a Darwinian accounts represents value and its recognition, and thus a Darwinian account provides an inadequate explanation.

In contrast, a teleological view of the evolutionary process explains the existence and recognition of value *as such*. For on that view, the emergence and development of life took place as it did partly *because* this process led to value and its recognition. As Nagel says, "part of the

explanation for the existence of that process and of the possibilities on which natural selection operates would be that they bring value into the world, in a great variety of forms.”¹⁹

It is clear, I think, that we do not need Street’s dilemma to articulate the line of thought that leads Nagel from value realism to a teleological explanation of evolution. Nor do the two most prominent types of reply to Street’s dilemma address the points that Nagel has in mind. Thus I conclude that Street’s argument is mostly a distraction from Nagel’s own reasons for thinking that value realism pushes us toward a historical teleology.

From Value Realism to Historical Teleology?

Having distinguished these issues, we can now ask: How convincing is Nagel’s argument that value realism calls for a teleological explanation of the evolutionary process? To answer this question, it will be helpful to consider the over-arching aim of *Mind and Cosmos*. That aim is to argue against a materialist (or, equivalently, reductionist) view of the natural order, and to explore the possibilities for non-materialist and anti-reductionist understandings of the cosmos. By materialist, Nagel means the view that “everything can be accounted for at the most basic level by the physical sciences, extended to include biology.”²⁰ The materialist claims that reality consists ultimately only of physical facts, and he hopes to explain thought, purpose, and value in terms of such facts. The non-materialist holds that other forms of explanation are needed to understand and explain reality. In brief, “there are some things that the physical sciences cannot fully account for.”²¹

Nagel has long been critical of reductionism.²² But *Mind and Cosmos* goes beyond his earlier writings in sketching a positive alternative picture of the natural order. As he says, “Even if the dominance of materialist naturalism is nearing its end, we need some idea of what might replace it. [...] A genuine alternative to the reductionist program would require an account of how mind and everything that goes with it is inherent in the universe.”²³

I believe that what leads Nagel to historical teleology is neither antireductionism as such, nor value realism as such, nor the combination of the two. Rather it is his notion of what “a genuine alternative” to reductionism must look like. I will now try to explain what I mean by this, and then raise some doubts about Nagel’s ideal of “comprehensive self-understanding.”²⁴

To see the issue, we can begin with an argument about living things that Nagel does not consider, but which has clear antireductionist implications of its own. In recent years, Michael Thompson has argued that we can conceive of something *as living* only by viewing it in light of some life-form concept, such as “the monarch butterfly” or “the African elephant.” Thompson’s basic argument goes as follows: In order to represent anything as living, we must interpret certain things as vital processes of an organism—as eating, swimming, etc. To be alive *just is* to be the subject of some vital processes, and thus representing an individual as living requires representing some things *as* vital processes. However, if an individual is considered in isolation from any conception of its life-form, then there is nothing to determine the appropriate description of what is happening *qua* vital process. For very different physical-chemical

happenings can amount to the same life process across different life-forms—e.g., “hunting” or “reproducing” can be instantiated in different physical-chemical happenings in individuals of different species. And the same physical-chemical happening can amount to different vital-processes in different life-forms. As Thompson points out, mitosis is a part of *reproduction* in an amoeba, and part of *self-maintenance* in a human being.²⁵ Considered in isolation from an understanding of the life-form in which these processes are occurring, there is nothing to fix the vital-description one way or another, nothing to determine that *this* physical-chemical happening *counts as* “hunting,” “reproducing,” etc. Thus, to grasp what is going on here and now with an organism, and even to see it *as* living, we must interpret an individual organism through some conception of its life-form.²⁶

Such a life-form conception, Thompson goes on to show, can be articulated in a system of “Aristotelian categoricals,” which express the characteristic features and activities of the life-form—e.g., “the bald eagle has two wings,” “tiger moths produce clicks to jam the echolocation systems of predator bats.” Aristotelian categoricals express the *function* of different parts and activities of the life-form: “they articulate the relations of dependence among the various elements and aspects and phases of a given kind of life.”²⁷ An organized system of such categoricals gives “one’s *interpretation* or *understanding* of the life-form shared by the members of that class.”²⁸

Thompson’s argument is antireductionist insofar as it demonstrates that our understanding of living things can never be reduced to the kind of physical-chemical descriptions that might equally describe *non-vital* activity. To see something *as* a vital part or process requires bringing to bear some implicit understanding of the life-form. And every life-form conception involves a grasp (however dim) of the *functional relations* among the parts and processes of the life-form. Thus to view something as living, we must employ some idea (perhaps mistaken) of how various things play a part in the life of this sort of creature. This is a teleological mode of understanding. And thus a teleological mode of understanding is unavoidable for getting anything into view *as living*.

For my purposes here, it does not really matter if Thompson’s arguments are convincing. The point I wish to stress is that, in spite of their antireductionist implications, Thompson’s claims are fully compatible with a Darwinian story of *how* particular life-forms came into existence. Thompson’s reflections show *what we are doing* when we represent something as living. But these reflections are neutral on questions about *how* living things came into being, or *why* the world is such as to having living things at all. If successful, Thompson’s arguments demonstrate that any Darwinian explanations must *presuppose* another, non-Darwinian form of thought. For we must already employ life-form concepts even to have a *topic* for Darwinian explanations and to provide us with the materials of that explanation. To represent something as a “gene,” for example, is already to engage in life-form thought, since we cannot represent something *as* a gene apart from some wider context provided by a life-form conception. Even so, Thompson’s reflections do not challenge the Darwinian explanation of the origin of life-forms. And the irreducible teleology of life-form thought certainly does not require the different kind of

teleology that is Nagel's focus—a teleology *within* the historical process of evolution whereby life-forms came into existence.

Consider now a different set of antireductionist claims, more directly related to issues of value. In his book *The Retrieval of Ethics*, Talbot Brewer argues that, in order to view something as an action, we must have some sense of what the agent took to be *good* in what she was doing. Drawing on the work of Elizabeth Anscombe, Brewer argues that explaining something as an action requires more than identifying certain causes of an occurrence, even if those causes are beliefs and desires. For beliefs and desires will not *make sense* of the action—not make it intelligible *qua* action—unless they reveal what the agent took to be good or valuable. As Brewer says:

[C]iting a desire can contribute to the rationalizing explanation of an action only insofar as it helps us to understand what the agent saw in the action such that it seemed worth choosing. If we can't see how a performance might be traced to some source of subjective appeal, then we have not yet seen why it counts as an action rather than mere obsession...To bring an agent into view requires that we come to see how the world of value might possibly appear to another, and this interpretive task cannot succeed with just any goal-directed bodily motions.²⁹

Brewer goes on to argue that in order to make sense of our lives—and especially of “dialectical activities” such as friendship—we must understand ourselves as (dimly) apprehending objective goods and values. Brewer's arguments are complex, and the details are not important for my point. What matters is that Brewer's position is clearly antireductionist on questions of value. (He says that his own view is premised upon “value realism.”³⁰) However, Brewer's view does not seem to require any particular further view of *how* agents came into existence, or *why* the world is such as to have agents and the values that they recognize. On a plausible reading of Brewer's position, his claim is of the following form: If we wish to make our actions and our lives intelligible in the fullest way possible, then we must employ a mode of understanding that makes reference to objective values. Thus the cost of abandoning value realism is becoming opaque to ourselves as agents, and becoming inarticulate about our activities. Understood this way, Brewer's position is analogous to Thompson's point about living things—it about *what we are doing* when we represent ourselves as agents. (This does not mean, of course, that values are not real, or that values are merely something we “project onto” the world—just as Thompson's arguments do not show that life is something we “project onto” the world.)

With Thompson and Brewer in mind, let us return to Nagel's argument about evolution and positive alternatives to reductionism. We can now distinguish more clearly between two questions. One question is what forms of intelligibility we require to understand ourselves and the natural order. This is the question that Nagel poses to frame the disagreement between materialists and antireductionists. The materialists whom Nagel opposes claim to know “that mentalistic, teleological, and evaluative intelligibility in particular have been left behind for good

as fundamental forms of understanding.”³¹ On this issue, the positions of Thompson and Brewer, respectively, place them on the side of Nagel against the materialists. With Thompson, we can say that understanding living things *as such* involves a form of intelligibility that is irreducibly teleological, requiring a thought about what plays a part in the life of the organism. With Brewer, we can say that understanding agents *as such* involves a form of intelligibility that is irreducibly evaluative, requiring some grasp of the goodness that an agent finds in what she is doing.

A second question is what sort of intelligibility is appropriate to the historical process of evolution. Here, Nagel suggests we ask: Why did the historical process of evolution give rise to value and creatures who recognize it, and why did it do this *under that description*? And historical teleology emerges as Nagel’s answer to that question. But neither antireductionism nor value realism requires us to pose the question as Nagel does. We might believe that reality includes organisms and agents and values and irreducibly normative truths, and we might hold that none of these things can be understood using only the concepts of the physical sciences, while at the same time holding that Nagel’s question has no answer, or is misguided.

Now, if Thompson is correct, our thought about the historical process of evolution unavoidably involves life-form concepts, since we are thinking about the evolution of *living* things. But neither this point, nor realism about value shows that in approaching the historical question of life’s origins we should seek a form of understanding that goes beyond the Darwinian account. Rather, it might be that the Darwinian story is all there is to say about the historical question, even though Darwinian explanation cannot replace other forms of understanding. On this kind of antireductionism, we simply have *different* modes of understanding—different kinds of concepts—that are appropriate to different domains of reality and different questions we ask. This is not a concession to materialism or reductionism. It does not show that values or normative truths are not real, or that they are replaceable with other modes of intelligibility. We can still insist that it is mistaken to attempt to replace all “mentalistic, teleological, and evaluative intelligibility” with the intelligibility of the physical sciences. But equally, we might be unable to integrate the different forms of intelligibility into a single mode of understanding, such that the historical account will also explain value *as such*.

This is why I said earlier that what leads Nagel to historical teleology is neither realism nor antireductionism as such, nor the combination of the two. This is also why it is potentially misleading to say that “an evolutionary self-understanding would almost certainly require us to give up moral realism—the natural conviction that our moral judgments are true or false independent of our beliefs.”³² For we should distinguish between two claims: (1) that Darwinian evolution explains how our species came into existence, and (2) that Darwinian explanations are the key to our *self-understanding*. An antireductionist might accept (1), while insisting that what has come into existence—the now-existing selves that we seek to understand—cannot be made (fully) intelligible with evolutionary forms of explanation.

The sort of antireductionism I have been sketching will, I believe, count for Nagel as “quietism.” As Nagel characterizes it, quietism is an antireductionist position that rests content with an “internal understanding” of our own point of view, rather pursuing a “transcendent self-

understanding.”³³ By “transcendent” Nagel means a self-understanding that places our own point of view into a larger perspective in which we have “the fundamental level of explanation of everything.”³⁴ Such a perspective aspires to an “all-encompassing form of understanding.”³⁵ For Nagel, quietism’s refusal to seek such all-encompassing understanding is untenable:

But while internal understanding is certainly valuable, and an essential precondition of a more transcendent project, I don’t see how we can stop there and not seek an external conception of ourselves as well. To refrain we would have to believe that the quest for a single reality is an illusion, because there are many kinds of truth and many kinds of thought, expressed in many different forms of language, and they cannot be systematically combined through a conception of a single world in which all truth is grounded. That is as radical a claim as any of the alternatives.³⁶

I am unsure how to assess Nagel’s remarks against quietism and its “pluralistic method.”³⁷ There seems to be a large gap between an “all-encompassing form of understanding,” on the one hand, and something that is mere “internal understanding,” on the other. Is it not possible to have various forms of “external understanding,” each of which places our point of view in some more external or “objective” viewpoint, but none of which encompasses or subsumes all the others? If so, it seems Nagel is wrong to characterize a pluralistic antireductionism as refusing to seek an external conception of ourselves.

That said, I feel the force of Nagel’s thought that is terribly unsatisfying to explain the origins of life—and everything that has come with it—in a way that makes it all seem like a lucky accident, or a marvelous side effect of other processes.³⁸ This sense of being unsatisfied is perhaps related to what Albert Camus identified as the source of the absurd. According to Camus, the absurd arises from a confrontation between our longing for absolute understanding and the fact that the world simply is not understandable in the ways we desire it to be. As he says, “This world in itself is not reasonable, that is all that can be said. But what is absurd is the confrontation of this irrational and the wild longing for clarity whose call echoes in the human heart.”³⁹ For Camus, the absurd arises only because human reason is able to understand and explain many things *within* its proper sphere—the sphere of human experience. Efficacious in this sphere, however, human reason inevitably seeks to go beyond it. This is our “appetite for understanding” and “nostalgia for the absolute.” The absurd “is born precisely at the very meeting-point of that efficacious but limited reason with the ever resurgent irrational.”⁴⁰

It is not hard to imagine Camus characterizing the lack of satisfaction that I (and Nagel) feel with the “lucky accident” view as the result of asking for a kind of explanation that reason is unable to give. Looked at this way, the desire for an explanation of mind and value *as such* is an instance of desiring a form of intelligibility that belongs to the human sphere, but is just not there to be found in the unreasonable world.⁴¹

All of this, of course, does not yet consider the theological possibilities for framing and addressing these issues.

Notes

1. Nagel 2012, 111.
2. Nagel also considers, and rejects, an explanation of the process in terms of divine intentionality. For considerations of space and simplicity, I set aside here the possibility of divine intentionality and focus on Nagel's own answer to the questions he raises.
3. Nagel 2012, 122–123.
4. Street 2006. See also: Street 2008 and Street 2011.
5. Nagel 2012, 100.
6. Ibid., 102.
7. Street 2006, 110.
8. Ibid., 122.
9. Ibid., 124.
10. Ibid.
11. Nagel 2012, 109.
12. This line of reply might be developed by casting doubt on the idea that having normative beliefs would actually have been advantageous to our ancestors. See Parfit 2011, 534–542. It might also be developed by arguing that, whatever the evolutionary influences on our evaluative tendencies, these tendencies do not determine the *outcome* of our normative reasoning. Rather, we are capable of “stepping back” from whatever tendencies for belief that evolution has left us with, and our judgments are best explained as outcomes of the reasoning that follows after we have stepped back. See Shafer-Landau 2012.
13. Enoch 2010, 431.
14. See Wielenberg 2010 and Skarsaune 2011.
15. Nagel 2012, 18–20.
16. Ibid., 47.
17. Ibid., 48.
18. Ibid., 117–118.
19. Ibid., 121.
20. Ibid., 13.

21. Ibid., 14.
22. See Nagel 1986.
23. Nagel 2012, 15.
24. Ibid., 29.
25. See Thompson 2008, 55.
26. For an in-depth treatment of these issues, see part 1 of Thompson 2008.
27. Thompson 2008, 78.
28. Ibid., 73.
29. Brewer 2009, 35–36.
30. Ibid., 274. I am unsure how much Brewer and Nagel agree on the term “realism,” but I don’t think the differences matters for my point.
31. Nagel 2012, 20.
32. Ibid., 28.
33. Ibid., 29–31.
34. Ibid., 21.
35. Ibid.
36. Ibid., 30.
37. Ibid.
38. For a nice summary of Nagel’s thought on this point, see Nagel 2012, 32.
39. Camus, 1991, 21.
40. Ibid., 36.
41. For Nagel’s own early reflections on absurdity and meaning, see his essay “The Absurd” in Nagel 1991.

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